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SUBJECT: Afghanistan Repeats Request for Assistance on Water  
Negotiations with Iran

#### AFGHAN OFFICIALS NERVOUS ABOUT RIPARIAN RIGHTS

¶1. (SBU) At the Islamabad Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA), Afghan Foreign Ministry officials repeated a request to USDEL for assistance on negotiating riparian rights, particularly with Iran. This follows on a request made earlier this year that led to a request for an AID-funded advisor to be placed in the Foreign Ministry. We believe that water rights negotiations will play a major role in economic development in Afghanistan. The Foreign Ministry's request for further assistance underscores Afghan sensitivities on this issue.

#### BACKGROUND ON AFGHAN-IRAN WATER RIGHTS ISSUE

¶2. (SBU) In January 2009, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Director General for Economic Affairs, Enatullah Nabil, asked Deputy Econ Counselor to relay an official request to Washington for assistance in preparing for riparian rights talks with Afghanistan's neighbors, particularly Iran. Nabil said that discussions under the Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation Conference (CAREC) in Baku last November raised the profile on water issues, with specific focus on Tajik and Afghan responsibilities as source countries and Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan as consumers.

¶3. (SBU) But Nabil emphasized riparian rights discussions with Iran are the most problematic. He said that shifts in the Harirud river basin are depleting the water resources for Afghan use to the benefit of Iran. He added that Iran is particularly displeased with construction of the Salma Dam, and said "Iran tries to make the workers' lives difficult" to impede progress on the project. Nabil believes that Iranian support for insurgent elements is due in part to the water issue, as instability helps prolong the status quo, which currently benefits Iran. He stressed the need for MFA to obtain negotiating expertise on these issues from the United States immediately. Afghan anxiety over this issue was the major reason Afghanistan wanted water off the agenda of the recent RECCA.

#### ACTIONS TO DATE AND RECOMMENDED

¶4. (SBU) As a result of these discussions, AID contracted with a lawyer well-versed in water rights topics. The Foreign Ministry is presently reviewing the resume of this top-ranked candidate selected by AID. If they approve, AID will mobilize the advisor as soon as

possible. In the meantime, we may wish to consider creating opportunities for Foreign Ministry officials to meet with Department experts to prepare for what will likely be thorny negotiations on water rights.

EIKENBERRY